

A Passover Message from Rabbi Michael Feshbach

Friends: As Pesach approaches we know that no other Jewish holiday requires as much preparation, provokes as much discussion -- or generates as many questions -- as does this one. The rituals surrounding Passover are complicated -- and they are considered a vitally important part of Jewish life and observance.

There are three basic commandments of Passover. The commandments are

- 1) to tell the story,
- 2) to eat matzah (especially on the first night), and
- 3) to not eat chametz (leavened products).

There is little problem with the first two; these are among the most widely observed of all the traditions of Jewish life. As to the third commandment here: it is demanding, difficult, and widely considered crucial to Jewish identity. It is also, I am sad to say, increasingly ignored.

Let us address the basic issue, before going on into the more complicated definitions. To refrain from bread during Passover is one of those special moments of Jewish life, a public act of discovery and connection. Many of us remember growing up and seeing even those families who were nominally or not otherwise at all observant send their kids to school with matzah sandwiches. Oh, you're Jewish? It was a bond we shared, over a bread that wasn't there.

Here I have my own confession, strange as it sounds to write these words now: growing up I observed this mitzvah, but not any of the more generic forms of keeping kosher. I distinctly remember eating -- possibly in my early college days -- ham and cheese on matzah during Passover. Kashrut was not at all meaningful to me at the time. But I would never have dreamed of eating bread during Pesach.

The Torah is quite clear in its assertion surrounding this commandment. What happens to the one who does not put aside leaven during this holiday? "*V'nich'reta hanefesh hahi m'Yisrael...* that person shall be cut off/cuts him or herself off from Israel." This social separation is one of the highest levels of punishment in Jewish law.

This act of putting aside the bread is what sociologists call a core marker of social identity. Following this tradition bonds us as a people. Failing to do so is an act that is shocking to those more immersed in the tradition; it is seen as a kind of public defiance, or deliberate rebellion.

I have been surprised in recent years to realize how widely ignored this commandment is. So I issue this as an invitation, and a plea: sometimes we

get the most out of what we consciously give up. For those of you who are new to this tradition: try it. I believe it offers far more in a sense of affirmation, connection and depth than it will cost in terms of inconvenience, distinction and effort. Try it and step into an ancient circle, a web that stretches through time and around the world. As Reform Jews it is true that we have the opportunity to choose which commandments and traditions are meaningful to us. But there are some basic ones. This is one of them.

Two other things to add.

The first is that, of course, refraining from chametz is a complicated commandment. If you are new to it, just put aside the obvious, the most blatant bread products you can.

But for those who want to delve more deeply, the definition of chametz is the subject of great debate. Basically, **Chametz** (also **Chometz**, **Chumetz** or **Ḥametz**; Hebrew: חָמֵץ (refers to a product that is)a (made from one of five types of grains ,and)b (has been combined with water and left to stand for longer than eighteen minutes without being baked .The five grains are wheat ,barley ,spelt ,rye and oats. For a more complete definition of chametz check out the following link: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chametz>

Perhaps the most confusing question here is the "middle ground" category, those products which are not actually chametz but which have been prohibited by centuries of Ashkenazic custom. These products are referred to as "kitniyot." Literally "small things," kitniyot refers to other grains or legumes. Traditions of what is considered kitniyot vary from community to community but generally include rice, corn, lentils and beans. Many include peanuts in this category. Sephardic Jews generally do not observe this prohibition, leading to the interesting phenomenon of an aisle in the supermarkets in Israel, during Passover, which is labelled: "Sephardic Jews only!"

Orthodox Ashkenazi authorities maintain this custom, but it is questioned in other places. The Conservative movement in Israel has deemed it divisive and affirmatively urges its followers to eat rice and beans. The North American Reform movement position on kitniyot, and whether we should follow it, is found here:

<http://data.ccarnet.org/cgi-bin/respdisp.pl?file=9&year=5756>

Complications within complications surround items such as corn syrup and peanut oil, which are widely considered prohibited but actually can be made, with proper supervision, into kosher for Passover products, according to some people. Mustard is generally not used during Passover, although it is unclear why, and some communities do not use garlic. (If I observed that prohibition I would not know how to cook at all!) Those interested in slightly more detail

can check out this link: <http://www.star-k.org/kashrus/kk-passover-kitniyos.htm>.

The second is to move on from the question of food, and back into the question of the celebration. The first commandment of Pesach is to tell the story. How we do so depends on family custom, and here the choice of which haggadah to use comes into play. There are so many excellent haggadot (plural of "haggadah") available. If anyone is interested I would be happy to show you my extensive collection of haggadot. But I have also taken the extra step of putting our own family haggadah on-line; it is now on the Temple Shalom website at <http://www.templeshalom.net>. It contains our own favorite readings culled from many different places, along with many of my own explanations. And all of the Hebrew is transliterated. Take a look, and let me know what you think!

Even this rather long message only scratches the surface of the customs and meanings associated with Passover. At this powerful and important time of year, from my family to yours: may we all open our homes, break matzah together, and share the story, in whatever way works most powerfully for each of us.

A zissen Pesach! A good, sweet Pesach to us all!
With my best wishes,
Rabbi Michael L. Feshbach